

# Teaching Instructivist Educated Digital Natives Using a Constructivist Learning Theory in Transnational Education

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## Abstract

This work looks at the teaching of eastern educated students (largely instructivist) by staff teaching in a western educational style (constructivist) if these staff themselves have been educated in an eastern educational style. Berry's four fold model of acculturation strategies is applied to the primary research. Conclusions are made that the staff modify their teaching and the materials they are provided with to accommodate the two learning styles. This work also confirms that the teachers conform to Berry's 'creative assimilation', as they display a 'new' form of the two learning cultures.

**Keywords:** learning theories, transnational education, instructivist, constructivist, acculturation

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Aim:

Investigate the experiences of teachers in transnational education from the viewpoint of the teacher in the host country.

### 1.2 Background:

John Berry (2005 p697) stated "*during acculturation, groups of people and their individual members engage in intercultural contact*" he looks to students from one country (or culture) moving to another. With transnational education we are looking at the education pedagogy moving to a host country. So a backwards application of the theory – does the constructivist learning theory acculturate to the (new) home country?

### 1.3 Research question:

Does the four fold model of acculturation strategies of Berry, i.e. assimilation, separation, integration and marginalisation, map onto the constructivist learning theory as perceived by the instructivist educated teacher who is now teaching constructivist based programmes. The research problem under investigation is the impact the different learning styles have on the teachers of a western education style, if they have themselves an Asian style of education, to students who have had an Asian education to date and how the teacher overcomes/meets the needs and demands of the two styles.

### 1.4 Literature review:

The term transnational education or Transnational Higher Education (TNHE), can cover a multitude of scenarios and models, it describes a system where a student studies for a (usually) degree in one country (host) but the awarding institution is in another (home). There are benefits to be gained on all sides, the host institution can teach at degree level so offering a Western education to students from their own country, this degree will usually be at less cost to the student than if they travelled and lived in for instance the UK, US or Australia. The research in this professional doctorate is carried out in Malaysia, one of the four main importing countries of TNHE (Chiang 2012). There is existing research into the impact of the west's

educational approach to the TNHE, but this is directed to the impact of the constructivist education to the learner and nothing on the impact of the teacher to their teaching of the approach if they themselves are not from a constructivist learning approach. How do these staff approach the west's style of teaching if they have not themselves been educated in that style?

Dunn and Wallace (2004) found from their student surveys that there was a difference in status between local (Singaporean) staff and visiting Australian lecturers, the latter were more 'expert' than the former in the students opinion. Some materials were Australian designed and delivered, and some local (Singapore) designed and delivered – the former were '*more self-directed than those taught by the partner organization*' (p293). Dunn and Wallace (2004) discuss Cheng and Wong's (1996) work where Confucianism influences education in certain parts of the world (including Malaysia), and that in some countries learning is more about '*compiling from the work of masters than comparing or creating new knowledge*' (p295), they are comparing instructivist education with that of constructivist. Zhang (2007) details the role of Confucian philosophy on Eastern educational and societal systems (see below)

- Teachers shown respect
- Learners learn knowledge
- Encourages learning together
- Large classes
- Pressure on student and teachers due to exams and their importance in teaching and learning
- Exam scores dictate performance of learners AND teachers
- Teachers use teacher's guides to deliver uniform content
- Government policies responsible for textbooks and assessment.

Adapted from Zhang (2007 p302)

*'on the spectrum of instructivism versus constructivism, the Eastern learning culture locates nearer the extreme of instructivist philosophy than the western learning culture'* (Zhang 2007 p308). Though this promotes the acquisition of knowledge there are drawbacks with respect to self direction and critical thinking.

An exam focus can leave the dynamic teacher behind, as if they want to introduce learning technologies to, for instance, encourage problem solving or innovation outside of the standard curriculum – then the exam grade focus means that this is not really feasible.

There is a strong emphasis on the use of English as the instructional medium, but this raises some debate in the research for instance Chiang (2012 p.183) raise the issue of the '*pre-packaging and mass-production*' of teaching materials without any acceptance of localisation of these materials and the context in which they are taught to non native students. This debate has existed for several years and there have been discussions and examples of where the localisation of course content has been made (Cheung 2006: Chiang 2012: Smith 2010: Wilkins and Huisman 2012). But again the research is focussed on students and high levels of analysis and recommendation. What is absent from this type of research is the impact the obligation has on the host lecturer through which the materials will be taught.

Berry (1997 p 6) asks the question "*what happens to individuals who have developed in one cultural context, when they attempt to live in a new cultural context?*". This question applies to the digital native student when they move from their home country to their country of study. It could equally apply also to the staff member teaching constructivist teaching materials if they are from an instructivist background. The cultural context in question can be seen as not only that of a physical move from one country to another, but that of the educational culture from instructivist to constructivist and vice versa.

Much research on acculturation uses the work of Berry as a basis, for instance his 1997 model. This identified a person's views or degree of acculturation:

1. Integrationist
2. Separationist
3. Assimilationist
4. Marginalised

Berry (1997) discusses the assimilation of people moving from home to host culture. Assimilation can be broken down to two different kinds, *creative* where the assimilated members display a new form of the two cultures (their own home merging with their new host), and *relative* where resistance to the change that the two cultures coming together are found.

## 1.5 Methodology

This research employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA investigate and researches when the ‘*everyday flow of lived experience takes on a particular significance for people*’ (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009 p1). IPA looks in detail to the particular case, it is ideographic as it studies a small number of people with the same experiences. The experience of each of these individuals is investigated; any similarities or differences in the experiences of these people are explored in detail. IPA needs a relatively homogenised sample to investigate allowing similarities and disagreement of experience to be investigated in detail. Data collection was through interviews with teaching staff that had been educated in the instructivist style and were now teaching using British materials, in the constructivist style of education. These interviews were recorded and detailed transcripts made. The analysis of this qualitative data is through detailed coding of the transcripts to produce themes of recurring patterns (e.g. feelings, ideas and thoughts) to produce superordinate themes, each of which contain a series of sub themes. The volunteers for this research are from a Malaysian college teaching a British computer Science degree. The staff have been known to the researcher for up to ten years as the franchise partnership means that UK staff visit the Malaysian college three times per year, this relationship has developed between the researcher and the local Malaysian staff, allowing for an ideographic and hermeneutic approach to the data gathering (which are essential for) using IPA.

## 1.6 Provisional Analysis and discussion:

By using IPA it was confirmed that all participants were educated in the Confucian, instructivist style, it was also found that the home learning theory (i.e. constructivist) was integrated into the host’s predominant learning theory (i.e. instructivist). The teaching staff who had been instructivist educated, adapted the constructivist teaching materials to accommodate the instructivist educated student. The staff provided the students with: additional guidance in the assessments to which they were not familiar; used the incentive of ‘this will help you in your marks for the module’ as a carrot to get students to participate in tutorials; provided additional text book based learning materials to which the students were directed. This work also confirms that the teachers conform to Berry’s creative assimilation, as they display a ‘new’ form of the two learning cultures. From open ended interviews, it was determined that the teaching staff had received an instructivist education and all had found issues and complications in teaching western education to the Asian educated students. Several methods of overcoming these issues were established, for instance the use of additional teaching materials via YouTube, difficulties in running small group tutorials and having to elaborate the UK set summative assessment.

## 2 Conclusion

This research has shown that teachers who have been educated in an instructivist learning environment, are teaching constructivist degree level programmes to instructivist educated students. The work shows that the lecturers are adapting their teaching and the constructivist materials to accommodate the needs and expectations of the students on the programmes of study.

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